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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 001693

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SUBJECT: THAILAND POLITICAL UPDATE: FATIGUE SETTING IN

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Classified By: DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION ALEX A. ARVIZU. REASON 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Negotiations for a public debate between the PM and opposition broke down late Friday, with both sides demanding that the other capitulate before their scheduled debate. Thousands of peaceful pro-Thaksin farmers have arrived in Bangkok from the provinces and are camped out--tractors and all--by the famed Chatuchak Weekend Market.

A hard-core thousand or so anti-Thaksin protesters remain broiling in the heat in front of Government House, with their ranks increasing in the evening. The opposition is publicly touting testimony from minor party candidates who say they were paid by Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party to run in the April 2 election. People in Bangkok are split over whether to vote in the coming election, according to the latest poll. Sources close to the palace continue to grumble over Thaksin's "unethical" populism. Finally, Thaksin's self-proclaimed astrologer has jumped the fence, calling for the PM to resign before he uses up all of his good karma. While the status of Thaksin's karma reserves may be in doubt, the energy level in the capital isn't. Fatigue is setting in, although the lull is probably only temporary, until we draw closer to the scheduled April 2 election. End Summary.

DEBATE OVER THE DEBATE ENDS

¶2. (SBU) Attempts to break the political deadlock fizzled last Friday. Negotiations to organize a public debate between the PM and his opponents ended after Thaksin's aides demanded that the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) end its protest outside government house before any debate takes place. PAD leaders refused, countering that they will not stop demonstrating until Thaksin resigns. This was expected public posturing as neither side realistically expected a debate to get off the ground.

THE FARMERS IN THE DELL

¶3. (SBU) A group of pro-Thaksin farmers from north and northeastern Thailand has set up camp in the lush park near Chatuchak Weekend Market. The group, which is calling itself the Caravan of the Poor, traveled to Bangkok over the course of last week in a convoy of colorful tractors known locally as E-tans.

¶4. (C) On the morning of March 20, Poloff visited the park and spoke with one of the organizers, Mr. Khamta Khaenboonchan. Khamta stated that about 18,000 persons are

registered as part of the Caravan. Today, they were divided into three sub-groups: one group stayed in the park listening to pro-Thaksin speakers on stage; another group went to Thammasat University to meet with student groups, and a third group headed down to the central business district of Silom. Poloff estimates that about 2,000 people were spread throughout the park during his visit. The majority were lounging under tents or beneath trees in the sprawling park. Only about 200-300 were actually sitting near the stage listening (somewhat disinterestedly) to the speakers on stage.

¶15. (C) Khamta said that the Caravan's main messages are to call for peace in the country, to support the April 2 elections and to call for unity in the period leading up to the 60th anniversary of the King's coronation. (Note. Absent from this platform is any overt mention of Thaksin. However, all of the banners, placards, headbands and other paraphernalia available voiced the group's support of the Prime Minister. End note.) Khamta emphasized repeatedly that the Caravan was peaceful in nature and would avoid any confrontation with anti-Thaksin groups. They are, however, seeking to invite small farmer organizations from the anti-Thaksin camp to engage in a public debate.

¶16. (C) The Caravan appears to be settling in for the long-haul. The Bangkok Municipal authority is providing electricity, toilets, garbage removal, police and a health post. The Caravan has a donations tent set up and is receiving donations of food and water from a variety of sources. They have also collected over 80,000 Baht (roughly \$2,000) in cash to help the farmers pay for gas for the return trip home. They plan to vote in the April 2 election in two shifts. Half of the group will leave early to do advanced voting, then return to Bangkok. Once that group returns, the second group will go home to vote on April 2.

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MEANWHILE, BACK AT GOVERNMENT HOUSE

¶17. (C) The "original" protestors--the anti-Thaksin Dharma Army of retired general Chamlong Srimuang--remain camped out, albeit with dwindling numbers in the vicious heat, in front of Government House. Poloff went from Chatuchak Park to Government House shortly before noon on Monday to check on their status. While the major cross streets surrounding the PM's office remain closed off to vehicular traffic, the crowd has been pared down to the truly hard-core. Perhaps 1,000-2,000 members of the Dharma Army remain sweltering under tents on the street, none of whom were paying any attention to the two men speaking on stage. Over the weekend, the evening crowd swelled to approximately 25,000.

DEMS-TRT TRADE SHOTS ON ELECTION FRAUD

¶18. (SBU) Following up on his allegations last week that TRT had paid members of minor parties to run in the April 2 vote, Democrat party Secretary General Suthep Thuaksuban presented three "witnesses" to the collusion. Three officials from the Pattana Chat party told reporters that they had worked with TRT to select candidates and received money to pay for those campaigns. They specifically cited TRT Deputy-Secretary Generals Pongsak Ruktapongpisal and Prommin Lertsuridej, as well as TRT deputy leader and Defense Minister Thammarak Issarangkul Na Ayutthaya, as being involved. All three TRT leaders have publicly denied the charges and threatened to sue Suthep. Election Commission head Vasana Puemlarp told reporters that his office was looking into Suthep's allegations. Meanwhile, the head of the Pattana Chat party told reporters that an opposition politician had offered to pay him millions of baht not to run in the April 2 election.

BANGKOK SPLIT ON VOTE

¶19. (U) The latest poll by the generally reliable ABAC organization reveals that Bangkokians remain split on the coming vote. Almost 48 percent plan to cast ballots, with 37 percent uncertain and 15 percent committing to not voting. About 40 percent want to delay the election. Nearly 47 percent of those polled disagree with the opposition's boycott of the election, but 21 percent support the boycott. Confidence in the election was more evenly split. About 44 percent of people are confident that the election will be fair, with 42 percent saying the opposite.

MORE PALACE GRUMBLING

¶10. (C) In a dinner over the weekend, the Ambassador discussed the current turmoil with Privy Councillor and West Point grad GEN Pichit Kullavanijaya and his well-connected wife. That both were quite vocal in their criticism of Thaksin was not surprising; the vehemence of their comments was unexpected, however. Pichit's wife alleged that the King is thoroughly displeased because Thaksin's efforts over time to curry favor with the controversial Crown Prince have "divided" the Royal Household.

ASTROLOGER TURNS AGAINST THAKSIN

¶11. (SBU) Adding to the list of erstwhile supporters turning against him, Thaksin's former family astrologer publicly called for the PM to step down on Friday. Samrit Klaokliang, who claims to have read the stars for the Shinawatra family over the last 35 years, told reporters that the PM's good karma--accumulated in a previous life--is running out, and that the stars are not in Thaksin's favor. According to Samrit, some lucky stars may shield the PM from misfortune, but the losses involved in him holding on to his seat far outweigh any benefit to staying on.

BOYCE